

## ARISTOTLE'S POETICS: A CRITIQUE

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### Abstract

This paper critically examines Aristotle's Poetics. We begin this discourse by beginning our analysis of Aristotle's Poetics with an exposition on the man Aristotle, vis-à-vis the socio-cultural milieu that influenced his thoughts and inspired his creative genius. The basic concepts in the poetics were also explained to enhance a clearer understanding of the study. We further did an analytical overview of the Aristotle Poetics. Finally, we gave an overview of the thought of Augusto Boal towards the Aristotle poetics.

Keywords: Aristotle, poetics, Freytag's pyramid and Augusto Boal,

### INTRODUCTION.

We begin this discourse by reiterating the truism that no artist creates from the void but rather from his/her environmental and socio-cultural influences. As this saying holds true, it is fitting therefore that we begin our analysis of Aristotle's Poetics with an exposition on the man Aristotle, vis-à-vis the socio-cultural milieu that influenced his thoughts and inspired his creative genius.

According to SparkNotes Editors (2015), Aristotle lived, historically, in the twilight years of Greek city-state. Ancient Greece consisted of several autonomous city-states. Athens, where Aristotle spent much of his active years was one such city-state, and indeed the most significant of all in terms of intellectual enterprise.

Essentially, Aristotle was a scientist with a strong leaning on Biology and Physics. Aristotle's background as a scientist and son of a medical doctor inspired in him a new philosophy that stood as a sort of counterbalancing force to Plato's idealism. To be clear, Aristotle was well versed in Platonic philosophy, especially Plato's Theory of Forms, which contends that the objects of experience are just shadows of a higher world of forms that lie beyond sensory experience. Aristotle's constant emphasis on Biology led him to favour close observation of natural phenomena

and careful classification of the data that were available to him, as the keys to making sense out of things.

Aristotle was the product of a Greek civilization that believed in an ordered and balanced physical universe, where man's conducts were dictated by the principles of rationality and moderation. Although the Sophist movement and other allied philosophical schools tried to challenge this dominant worldview, Aristotle remained one of its firm advocates, as his works suggest. In fact, Aristotle rejected the unscientific notion that we can only make sense of the world by appealing to invisible entities beyond it. Closer to Aristotle's time, Euripides often violated the Athenian belief in the principles of structure and balance in a conscious effort to depict a universe that is neither structured nor balanced. Not surprisingly, Aristotle preferred Sophocles who advocated structure and balance to Euripides. The best example we have of an Aristotelian tragedy is *Oedipus Rex*, so it is no wonder that Aristotle makes such frequent reference to it in his examples.

Aristotle wrote on a wide range of subjects including the arts and humanities. Most of his works did not survive. But among his surviving works, particularly on arts, the *Poetics* (335 BC) is generally regarded as the most significant. It is the earliest surviving detailed study of tragic theory and practice. According to Dukore (1974 p.1), it has been suggested by many that the *Poetics* is more of an outline of a book or perhaps notes for a lecture. In the first paragraph of the *Poetics*, Aristotle gives a hint as to how we should approach the work: it is meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, Aristotle is not so much interested in arguing that poetry or tragedy *should* be one thing or another. Rather, he wants to look at past examples of poetry—tragedy in particular—and by dissecting them and examining their constituent parts to arrive at some general sense of what poetry is and how it works.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle approaches poetry with the same scientific exactitude with which he treats *Physics* and *Biology*. This of course, as we have noted is one of the telling influences of his science background on his works. He begins *Poetics* by collecting and categorizing data available to him, and draws conclusions while advancing certain theses in accordance with his analysis. From the classical era to date, the *Poetics* has arguably remained the hub around which most critical discourses on tragic drama rotate.

It has to be stated that to a large extent, the *Poetics* is sketchy in its treatment of certain subjects and this has lent it to various often conflicting interpretations, generating an almost infinite body of literature in the process. In this analysis, we

attempt to establish a clear basis for the mutual understanding of Poetics by first defining some of these basic ambiguous concepts that characterize the work.

### Basic Concepts in Aristotle's Poetics

**Mimesis:** Mimesis is the act of creating in an individual's mind, through artistic representation, an idea or ideas that the person will associate with real past experience. Roughly translated as "imitation"; *mimesis* in poetry is the act of telling stories that are set in the real world. The events in the story need not have taken place (fictional realism), but the telling of the story will help the listener or viewer to imagine the events taking place in the real world.

**Hamartia:** This word translates almost directly as "error," though it is often explained more elaborately as "tragic flaw." Tragedy, according to Aristotle, involves the downfall of a hero, and this downfall is caused by some error of judgment on the part of the hero. This error need not be an overarching moral failing—not a vice: it could be a simple matter of not knowing something or forgetting something.

**Anagnorisis:** Translated as "recognition" or "discovery", it describes the moment where the hero, or some other character, passes from ignorance to knowledge. This could be recognition of a long lost acquaintance or relation, or it could be a sudden recognition of some fact about oneself, as is the case with Creon in Sophocle's *Antigone*. *Anagnorisis* often occurs at the climax of a tragedy in tandem with *peripeteia*.

**Peripeteia:** A reversal in fortune, either from good to bad or bad to good. *Peripeteia* often occurs at the climax of a story, often prompted by *anagnorisis*. Indeed, we might say that the *peripeteia* is the climax of a story: it is the turning point in the action, where things begin to move toward a conclusion.

**Mythos:** In tragedy, this word is usually translated as "plot," but unlike "plot", *mythos* can be applied to all works of art. Not so much a matter of what happens and in what order, *mythos* deals with how the elements of a tragedy or the five arts come together to form a coherent and unified whole. The overall message or impression that we come away with is what is conveyed to us by the *mythos* of a piece.

**Catharsis:** This word was normally used in ancient Greece by doctors to mean "purgation" or by priests to mean "purification." In the context of tragedy, Aristotle uses it to talk about a purgation or purification of emotions. We presume this means that *katharsis* is a release or expulsion of built up emotional energy. After *katharsis*, the audience reach a more stable and neutral emotional state.

**Desis:** Literally it implies "tying", the *desis* is all the action in a tragedy leading up to the climax. Plot threads are craftily woven together to form a more and more

complex mess. At the *peripeteia*, or turning point, these plot threads begin to unravel in what is called the denouement.

### **Analytical Overview of Poetics.**

In this classical thesis-*Poetics*, Aristotle implies that it is human nature to write and appreciate poetry. This is the basic foundation of the *Mimetic Theories* of aesthetics (Anderson, 1989), which explain that humans are by nature imitative creatures that learn and excel by imitating others, and naturally take delight in works of imitation. As evidence of the claim that humans delight in imitation, Aristotle points out that we are fascinated by representations of grotesque and disgusting phenomena even though the things themselves would repel us. He suggests that we can also learn by examining representations and imitations of things and that learning is one of the greatest pleasures there is; while rhythm and harmony also come naturally to us, so that poetry gradually evolved out of our improvisations with these media – rhythm and harmony.

Aristotle states further that as poetry evolved, a sharp chasm developed between serious writers who would write about noble characters in lofty hymns and panegyrics, and less noble writers who would write about ignoble characters in demeaning invectives. Tragedy and comedy are later developments that are the grandest representations of these respective traditions: tragedy of the lofty tradition and comedy of the mean tradition. Much of Aristotle's focus in *Poetics* is on tragedy. A cursory look at his definition of tragedy is necessary for a more focused analysis:

*Tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play, in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (In Dukore, 1974 p.36)*

Aristotle defines tragedy according to seven characteristics: (1) it is mimetic, (2) it is serious, (3) it tells a full story of an appropriate length, (4) it contains rhythm and harmony, (5) rhythm and harmony occur in different combinations in different parts of the tragedy, (6) it is performed rather than narrated, and (7) it arouses feelings of pity and fear and then purges these feelings through catharsis. According to him, tragedy consists of six component parts, which are listed here in

order from most important to least important: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle.

A well-crafted plot, he contends, must have a beginning, which is not a necessary consequence of any previous action; a middle, which follows logically from the beginning; and an end, which follows logically from the middle and from which no further action necessarily follows. The plot should be unified, meaning that every element of the plot should be tied to the rest of the plot, leaving no loose ends. This kind of unity allows tragedy to express universal themes powerfully and this Aristotle says, is what makes it superior to history, which can only talk about particular events. Episodic plots are bad because there is no necessity to the sequence of events. The best kind of plot contains surprises, but surprises that, in retrospect, fit logically into the sequence of events. The best kinds of surprises, according to him are brought about by a reversal in fortune of characters (*peripeteia*), and the recognition or discovery of a fundamental truth (*anagnorisis*). A good plot progresses like a knot that is tied up with increasingly greater complexity until the moment of *peripeteia*, at which point the knot is gradually untied until it reaches a completely unknotted conclusion.

Aristotle explains that for a tragedy to arouse pity and fear, we must observe a hero who is relatively noble going from happiness to perdition as a result of error on the part of the hero. Our pity and fear is aroused most when it is family members who harm one another rather than enemies or strangers. In the best kind of plot, one character narrowly avoids killing a family member unwittingly thanks to a discovery that reveals the filial relationship. The hero must have good qualities appropriate to his or her station and should be portrayed realistically and consistently. Since both the character of the hero and the plot must have logical consistency, Aristotle concludes that the untying of the plot must follow as a necessary consequence of the plot and not from stage artifice, like a *deus ex machina* (a machine used in some plays, in which an actor playing one of the gods was lowered onto the stage at the end) as we find in Euripedes' *Medea*.

He discusses thought and diction and then moves on to address epic poetry. Whereas tragedy consists of actions presented in a dramatic form, epic poetry consists of verses presented in a narrative form, the most popular example being Homer's *Iliad*. Tragedy and epic poetry have many common qualities, most notably the unity of plot and similar subject matter. However, epic poetry can be longer than tragedy, and because it is not performed, it can deal with more fantastic action with a much wider scope. By contrast, tragedy can be more focused and takes advantage of the devices of music and spectacle. Epic poetry and tragedy are



also written in different meters. After defending poetry against charges that it deals with improbable or impossible events, Aristotle concludes by weighing tragedy against epic poetry and declares that tragedy is on the whole superior.

Aristotle strongly implies that tragedy has achieved its completeness and finished form by listing four innovations in the development from improvised dithyrambs toward the tragedies of his day. The first of these developments is that whereas dithyrambs were sung in honor of Dionysus, god of wine, by a chorus of around fifty men and boys, often accompanied by a narrator, Aeschylus reduced the number of the chorus and introduced a second actor on stage, which made dialogue the central focus of the poem. Second, Sophocles added a third actor and also introduced background scenery. Third, tragedy developed an air of seriousness, and the meter changed from a trochaic rhythm, which is more suitable for dancing, to an iambic rhythm, which is closer to the natural rhythms of conversational speech. Fourth, tragedy developed a plurality of episodes, or acts.

Next, Aristotle explains more on what he means when he says that comedy deals with people of a baser nature, saying that comedy deals with the ridiculous. He defines the ridiculous as a kind of ugliness that does no harm to anybody else. Aristotle is able only to give a very sketchy account of the origins of comedy, because it was not generally treated in the same depth as tragedy and so there are fewer records of the innovations that led to its present form.

Acknowledging the emphasis on lofty subjects in a grand style of verse as the basic similarity between tragedy and epic poetry, Aristotle notes three significant differences between the two genres. First, tragedy is told in a dramatic, rather than narrative form, (... of action, not of narrative) and employs several different kinds of verses while epic poetry employs only one. In addition, the action of a tragedy is usually much shorter than that of an epic poem. Third, while tragedy has all the elements that are characteristic of epic poetry, it also has some additional elements that are unique to it alone.

Aristotle explains further his assertion that the action of a tragedy is innately complete and with magnitude. For a plot to be a complete whole, it must have a beginning, middle, and end. This point could be better explained through an examination of the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. It begins at the point of crisis in the kingdom of Thebes as the citizens implore king Oedipus to act and save them. At this point (until later revealed), there is nothing in the story that suggests the crisis in the land is connected to any previous incident. Then as the plot progresses, we are introduced to the principal characters' reaction to the crisis that

opens the play. Their reaction leads expectedly to the sad outcome of the play, at which point all questions are answered.

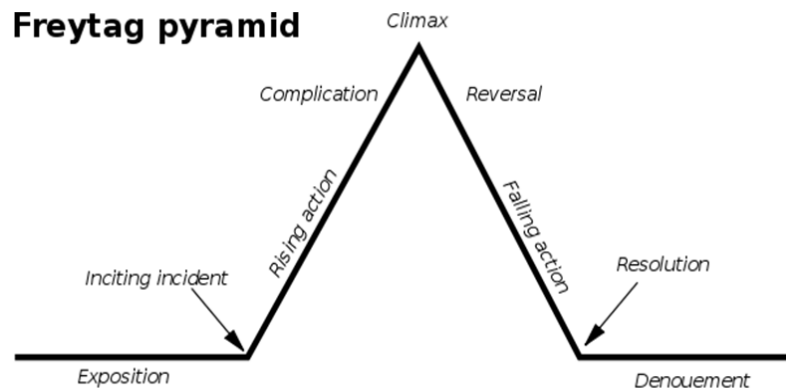
Aristotle contends that the magnitude of a story is important, as it is in any art. A tragedy must be of a moderate length so as to be taken in by the memory. Usually, time limits are set by the audience or other external factors, but Aristotle suggests that the longer the play the greater the magnitude, provided the writer can hold the tragedy together as one coherent statement. As a general rule, he suggests the action should be long enough to allow the main character to pass through a number of necessary or probable steps that take him from fortune to misfortune (*peripeteia*).

In insisting upon the unity of plot, Aristotle clarifies that he does not mean that it is enough to focus the plot on the life of one individual. Human lives, he argues, consist of all sorts of disconnected episodes, and the story of a man's life would rarely have the completeness necessary for a unified plot. Rather, the dramatist must select some series of serious events from a character's life—as Euripedes does in the *The Trojan Women*—and craft them into a coherent whole. Any part of a story that could be added or removed without any great effect on the rest of the story is superfluous and takes away from the unity of the piece. This point is further espoused by Augusto Boal who explains that tragedy imitates human acts—human acts not merely human activities and:

*For Aristotle, man's soul was composed of a rational part and of another, irrational part. The irrational soul could produce certain activities such as eating, walking or performing any physical movement without greater significance than the physical act itself. Tragedy on the other hand, imitated solely man's actions, determined by his rational soul... directed to the attainment of his supreme end, happiness. (1979 p. 12-13).*

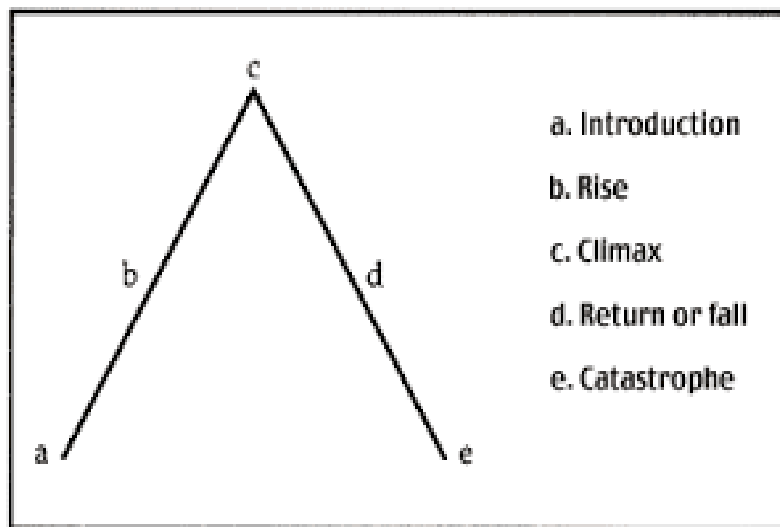
Aristotle also distinguishes between poetry and history, saying that while history deals with what has been, poetry deals with what might be: presenting the possible as probable or necessary. Poetry, he argues, is superior to history because history always deals with particular cases while poetry can express universal and general truths. Tragedy gives a feeling of necessity—or at least probability—to the way certain characters behave in certain situations and thus gives us insight into general principles regarding fate, choice, and so on. Aristotle consequently recommends the linear plot structure for tragedy, stating that the worst kind of plot is the

episodic plot, where there is no seeming necessity or probability whatsoever between events. Specifically, Aristotle recommends the Five-act plot structure. Throwing more light on the make-up of Aristotle's recommended five-acts structure, Freytag (1863) presents the following graphic illustration in figure 1a and 1b:



**Figure 1a:** Freytag's pyramid on Aristotle's five-acts plot structure

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav\\_Freytag](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Freytag)



**Figure 1b:** Freytag's pyramid on Aristotle's five-acts plot structure

Freytag's pyramid (1863): *symbolizing his theory of dramatic structure, which is an elaboration of Aristotle's five-acts plot structure. According to Freytag, a*



*drama is divided into five parts, or acts, which some refer to as a dramatic arc: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement.*

Again, Aristotle posits that as a medium that arouses pity and fear, tragedy is most effective when events occur unexpectedly and yet in a logical order. The ideal thing is to make the audience see the final outcome of a tragedy as the necessary consequence of all the action that preceded it, and yet have that outcome be totally unexpected.

In the final analysis, a close look at the *Poetics* reveals that three points stand out as probably the most important: (1) the interpretation of poetry as imitation-*mimesis*, (2) the insistence on the primacy and unity of *mythos*, or plot, and (3) the view that tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and then to effect a *katharsis* of these emotions.

### **Poetry (Tragedy) as Mimesis**

The Greek word *mimesis* as already stated in this thesis defies an exact translation, though "imitation" fits well in the context of the *Poetics*. Aristotle argues that all art is imitation of real life. Painting uses paint to imitate real life, and sculpture uses stone or wood. Poetry is distinguished as the mimetic art that uses language, rhythm and harmony to imitate real life, language obviously being the most crucial component. The subject of tragic imitation often raises some questions. Aristotle implies that only the high points of serious human actions should be imitated. The events in *Oedipus Rex* certainly meet this standard. Oedipus' quest is not an individual one but rather a mission to save society.

### **Centrality and Unity of Plot**

The first essential to creating a good tragedy (as Aristotle states) is the need to maintain unity of plot. The plot can also be enhanced by an intelligent use of *peripeteia*, or reversal, and *anagnorisis*, or recognition. These elements work best when they are made an integral part of the plot. A plot should consist of a hero going from happiness to misery. The hero should be portrayed consistently and in a good light, though the poet should also remain true to what we know of the character (if the story is drawn from myth, legend or history). The misery should be the result of some *hamartia*, or error, on the part of the hero. Oedipus' flaw is his inordinate arrogance and refusal to obey the unwritten law of moderation-the golden mean. A tragic plot must always involve some sort of tragic deed, which can be done or left undone, and this deed can be approached either with full

knowledge or in ignorance. For example, Oedipus approaches his quest in complete ignorance of his culpability in the final analysis.

Aristotle's insistence on the completeness of plot could be criticized as antithetical to real life where there are no beginnings or endings, and what happens in between the beginning and end of a series of human actions is nowhere near as neatly organized as it is in tragedy. Perhaps what Aristotle is implying is that the role of the tragedian is to take a certain series of events and trace a logical sequence between them. The tragic action then shows us that there is some order, some necessity, in the world around us. We learn that certain kinds of behavior, certain choices, lead to certain consequences. In essence, Aristotle implies that tragedy should draw patterns out of a meaningless swirl of experiences. The end of the tragedy gives meaning to all that preceded it, thereby showing that there is a clear connection between human actions and the consequences of those actions. In other words, certain range of actions begets certain consequences.

### **Pity and Fear as End of Tragedy**

The aim of tragedy, Aristotle writes, is to bring about a "catharsis" of the spectators, to arouse in them feelings of pity and fear, and to purge them of these emotions so that they leave the theater feeling purified, cleansed and uplifted, with a heightened understanding of the ways of gods and men. We could call this the therapeutic essence of tragedy. This catharsis is brought about by witnessing some disastrous and moving change in the fortunes of the drama's protagonist (Aristotle recognizes that the change might not be disastrous, but feels this is the kind shown in the best tragedies — *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, was considered a tragedy by the Greeks but does not have an unhappy ending).

Since tragedy aims to arouse pity and fear through an alteration in the status of the protagonist, Aristotle states that he must be a figure with whom the audience can identify and whose fate can trigger these emotions. Aristotle says that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves." He defines the ideal protagonist as

*. . . a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment or frailty; a personage like Oedipus.*

In addition, the hero should not offend the moral sensibilities of the spectators, and as a character he must be true to type, true to life, and consistent. Oedipus embodies these characteristics.

The hero's frailty (*harmartia*) should not be misleadingly explained as his "tragic flaw," in the sense of that personal quality which inevitably causes his downfall or leads him to perdition. This is because overemphasis on a search for the decisive flaw in the protagonist as the key factor for understanding the tragedy can lead to superficial interpretations. As SparkNotes Editors (2015) put it, it gives more attention to personality than the dramatists intended and ignores the broader philosophical implications of the typical plot's denouement. It is true that the hero frequently takes a step that initiates the events of the tragedy and, owing to his own ignorance or poor judgment, acts in such a way as to bring about his own downfall. In a more sophisticated philosophical sense though, the hero's fate, despite its immediate cause in his finite act, comes about because of the nature of the cosmic moral order and the role played by chance or destiny in human affairs. Unless the conclusions of most tragedies are interpreted on this level, the reader is forced to credit the Greeks with the most primitive of moral systems. Take Sophocles' Oedipus or Euripedes' Pentheus for example, their actions that ultimately lead them to perdition are orchestrated by forces beyond their immediate control. Oedipus makes his mistakes because the Delphic oracle would not answer him a simple question relating to his real relationship with Polybus and Meriope. The sins of Oedipus were committed unknowingly; in fact Oedipus does his utmost to avert the disaster. Oedipus is, therefore, essentially an innocent man, despite his flaws of pride and tyranny. Jocasta too is innocent, albeit she is sceptical. There is no repulsive villainy in Oedipus Rex. Pentheus on the other hand is deceived by the god Dionysus who deliberately conceals his divine identity from him. He therefore makes his mistake of opposing the god in utmost good faith as a leader and moral authority whose duty it is to protect the citizens from being exploited by political jobbers. There is therefore no villainy in King Pentheus.

*Harmartia* is the factor that underscores the protagonist's imperfection and keeps him on a human plane, making it possible for the audience to sympathize and empathize with him as one of their kind. This view tends to give the "flaw" an ethical definition but relates it only to the spectators' reactions to the hero and does not increase its importance for interpreting the tragedies.

### **Augusto Boal's Views on Aristotle's *Poetics***

Boal commenting on the poetics asks the important question “what does tragedy imitate?” Tragedy, he explains, imitates human acts but not human activities. These acts are summarily categorized into

- i. Faculty
- ii. Passion and
- iii. Habits

He stated that tragedy imitates man’s action, those actions of his rational soul directed towards the attainment of his supreme end, happiness. But in order to understand which actions they have to know first what happiness is.

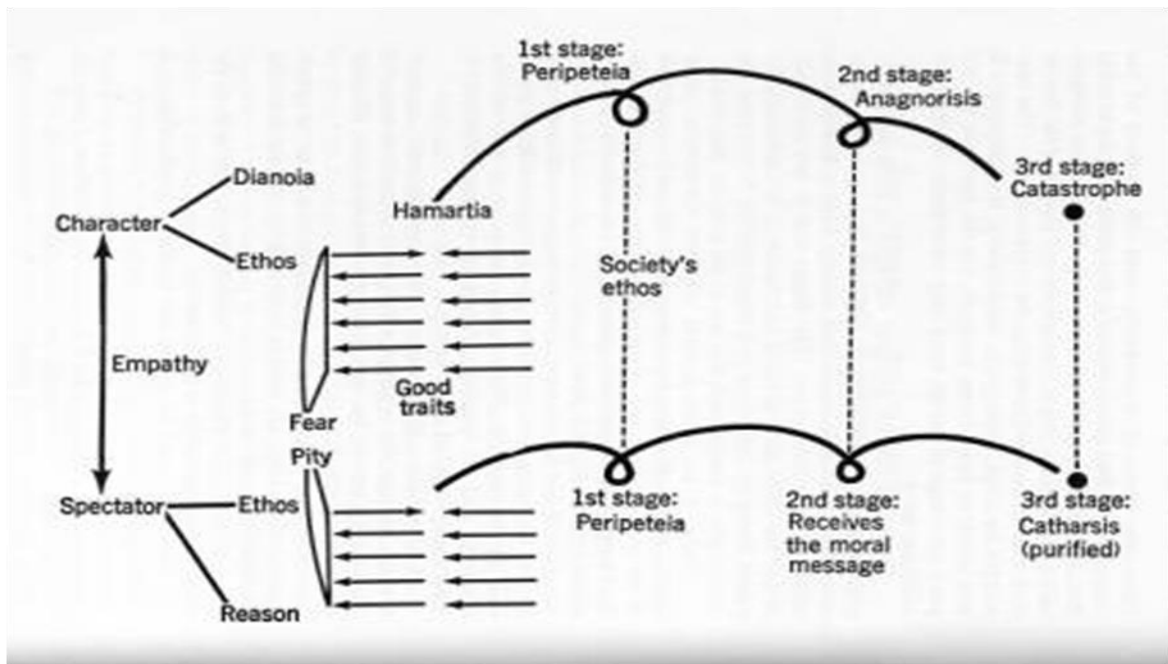
Boal also talks about Aristotle's *Coercive System of Tragedy*: The spectacle begins. The tragic hero appears. The public establishes a kind of empathy with him. Then the action starts. Surprisingly, the hero shows a flaw in his behavior called the hamartia/flaw and even more surprising, one learns that it is by virtue of this same flaw that the hero has come to his present state of happiness. Through empathy, the same hamartia that the spectator may possess is stimulated, developed and activated. Suddenly, something happens that changes everything. (Oedipus, for example, is informed by Teiresias that the murderer he seeks is Oedipus himself.) The character that because of a hamartia had climbed so high runs the risk of falling from those Olympian heights. This is what the Poetics classifies as peripeteia, a radical change in the character's destiny. The spectator, who up to then had his own hamartia stimulated, starts to feel a growing sense of fear. The character is now on the way to misfortune. Creon (in *Antigone*) is informed of the death of his son and his wife; Hippolytus (in *Phaedra*) cannot convince his father of his innocence, and the latter impels his son, unintentionally, to death.

Peripeteia is considered by Boal as important because it lengthens the road from happiness to misfortune and he more intense the peripeteia the stronger the impact of the tragedy. The peripeteia suffered by the character is reproduced in the spectator as well. But it could happen that the spectator would follow the character empathically until the moment of the peripeteia and then detach himself at that point. In order to avoid that, the tragic character must also pass through what anagnorisis - that is, through the recognition of his flaw as such and, by means of reasoning, the explanation of it. The hero accepts his error, hoping that, empathically, the spectator will also accept as bad his own hamartia. But the spectator has the great advantage of having erred only vicariously: he does not really pay for it.

Finally, so that the spectator will keep in mind the terrible consequences of committing the error not just vicariously but in actuality, Aristotle demands that tragedy have a terrible end which he calls catastrophe. The happy end is not permitted, though the character's physical destruction is not absolutely required. Some die (Agamemnon in *Agamemnon*); others see their loved ones die (Creon in *Antigone*). In any case the catastrophe is always such that not to die is worse than death.

Boal concludes that those three interdependent elements (peripeteia anagnorisis, catastrophe) have the ultimate goal of provoking catharsis in the spectator (as much or more than in the character); that is their purpose is to produce a purgation of the hamartia, passing through three clearly defined stages:

Aristotle's coercive system can be shown graphically in figure 3:



**Figure 3:** Augusto Boal’s Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy.

From figure above, First Stage captures the Stimulation of the hamartia; the character follows an ascending path toward happiness, accompanied empathically

by the spectator. Then comes a moment of reversal- the character, with the spectator, starts to move from happiness toward misfortune; fall of the hero.

Second Stage depicts the character as he recognizes his error - anagnorisis. Through the empathic relationship the spectator recognizes his own error, his own hamartia, his own anticonstitutional flaw while the Third Stage explains the Catastrophe; the character suffers the consequences of his error, in a violent form) with his own death or with the death of loved ones.

Catharsis: The spectator, terrified by the spectacle of the catastrophe, is purified of his hamartia, and this is what Boal calls the Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy.

It is important to note that some notable writers such as Jean Racine, Jacob Bernays, Milton, Butcher, gave commendable comments on "The Poetics" they pattern in accordance to the theories and practices of the *Poetics* by Aristotle. This is one testimony to the impact of Poetics on dramatic literature through the ages.

## **Summary of Important Chapters (Reproduced from Sparknotes Editors)**

### **Chapters 1-6**

A tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious and has a wholeness in its extent, in language that is pleasing (though in distinct ways in its different parts), enacted rather than narrated, culminating, by means of pity and fear, in the cleansing of these passions ...So tragedy is an imitation not of people, but of action, life, and happiness or unhappiness, while happiness and unhappiness have their being in activity, and come to completion not in a quality but in some sort of action ...Therefore it is deeds and the story that are the end at which tragedy aims, and in all things the end is what matters most ...So the source that governs tragedy in the way that the soul governs life is the story.

### **Chapter 7**

A complete plot is that which has a beginning, middle and end. But a beginning is something which, in itself, does not need to be after anything else, while something else naturally is the case or comes about after it; and an end is its contrary, something which in itself is of such a nature as to be after something else, either necessarily or for the most part, but to have nothing else after it-It is therefore needful that well put together stories not begin from just anywhere at random, nor end just anywhere at random ...And beauty resides in size and order ...the oneness



and wholeness of the beautiful thing being present all at once in contemplation ...in stories, just as in human organizations and in living things.

## **Chapter 8**

A story is not one, as some people think, just because it is about one person ...And Homer, just as he is distinguished in all other ways, seems to have seen this point beautifully, whether by art or by nature.

## **Chapter 9**

Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of objects of fear and pity, and these arise most of all when events happen contrary to expectation but in consequence of one another; for in this way they will have more wonder in them than if they happened by chance or by fortune, since even among things that happen by chance, the greatest sense of wonder is from those that seem to have happened by design.

## **Chapters 13-14**

Since it is peculiar to tragedy to be an imitation of actions arousing pity and fear ...and since the former concerns someone who is undeserving of suffering and the latter concerns someone like us ...the story that works well must ...depict a change from good to bad fortune, resulting not from badness. One that arises from the actions themselves, the astonishment coming about through things that are likely, as in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles. A revelation, as the word indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge that produces either friendship or hatred in people marked out for good or bad fortune. The most beautiful of revelations occurs when reversals of condition come about at the same time, as is the case in the *Oedipus* where King Oedipus changes from hunter to the hunted.

## **Chapters 24-25**

Wonder needs to be produced in tragedies, but in the epic there is more room for that which confounds reason, by means of which wonder comes about most of all, since in the epic one does not see the person who performs the action; the events surrounding the pursuit of Hector would seem ridiculous if they were on stage ...But wonder is sweet ...And Homer most of all has taught the rest of us how one ought to speak of what is untrue ...One ought to choose likely impossibilities in

preference to unconvincing possibilities ...And if a poet has, represented impossible things, then he has missed the mark, but that is the right thing to do if he thereby hits the mark that is the end of the poetic art itself, that is, if in that way he makes that or some other part more wondrous.

## CONCLUSION

Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* almost a century after the greatest Greek tragedians had already died, in a period when there had been radical transformations in nearly all aspects of Athenian society and culture. The tragic drama of his day was not the same as that of the fifth century the same as modern drama, and to a certain extent his work must be construed as a historical study of a genre that no longer existed rather than as an emphatic description of a living art form. Nonetheless, as Milch (2015) puts it, the *Poetics* is the only critical study of Greek drama to have been made near-contemporary. It contains much valuable information about the origins, methods, and purposes of tragedy, and to a degree shows us how the Greeks themselves reacted to their theater. In addition, Aristotle's work had an overwhelming influence on the development of drama long after it was compiled. The ideas and principles of the *Poetics* are reflected in the drama of the Roman Empire and dominated the composition of tragedy in Western Europe during the Renaissance as well as the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

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